

Joseph Leiter, FMLA, 1915–2005



Joseph (Joe) Leiter, FMLA, the first associate director of library operations at the National Library of Medicine (NLM), died in Bethesda, Maryland, on May 27, 2005, at the age of ninety. During his tenure from 1965 to 1983, he contributed immeasurably to a variety of important programs at NLM and in the larger medical library community. These programs are a catalog of successes that contemporary librarians take for granted every day. The development of MEDLINE (teaming up with the late Davis McCarn), DOCLINE, the Regional Medical Libraries, the NLM Associate Program, the introduction of contracts to expand library services, and the advancement of women and minorities in the profession are only part of his legacy.

Joe recognized immediately that he could entrust most of the details of managing library operations to the library's staff. As he told Betsy L. Humphreys in his MLA oral history interview,

I really shied away from all the mechanics of the Library because I knew so little about them that I figured the best thing to do was to let things run until there was trouble, and then you'd have to try to solve them.

This is not to underestimate Joe's

contributions: he was a quick study with a brilliant mind, and he had the great ability to recognize potential problems, often before others did.

Joseph Leiter was born on Delancey Street in New York's Lower East Side on May 14, 1915. At nineteen, he graduated from Brooklyn College with a degree in chemistry. After graduation, he found himself at loose ends, with his family unable to afford graduate school tuition and with no financial assistance available in those Depression years. He took a US government exam in science to become a laboratory apprentice, earned a perfect score, and went to work at the National Bureau of Standards (now the National Institute of Standards and Technology). After a few years, he received an offer to work at a National Cancer Institute (NCI) laboratory, where he stayed until 1965.

While at NCI, he took a four-year leave of absence to serve in the US Army during World War II and matriculated at Georgetown University, where he received a doctorate in biochemistry in 1949. By the early 1960s, Joe was chief of NCI's Cancer Chemotherapy Service Center. He was one of the pioneer researchers in the United States, working on environmental carcinogens and on developing drug therapies for cancer.

Martin M. Cummings, FMLA, NLM's director, who had inherited the Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS) from his predecessor, Frank Bradley Rogers, had received a favorable letter about the system from Joe. Cummings went to meet Joe and was intrigued with his vast experience in administering contracts at NCI. He wanted someone tough enough to protect the government's interest in working with contractors, and he thought Joe could move the library forward. Surprised that Joe wanted to leave his prestigious NCI job, Cummings hired him as quickly as he could.

Joe wasted no time in taking charge of library operations. He was a task master whose "in your face" style was uncomfortable for many NLM staff. You had to prove to Joe that you knew what you were doing. He often used the Socratic method to "help" staff produce the answer he wanted. For Cummings, Joe's most significant contribution to NLM was his identification and cultivation of a team of young managers with strong technical skills. He encouraged them to take risks and defended their decisions. As manager of the team, Joe directed the development of CATLINE, AVLINE, and the Name Authority File. He involved NLM in national bibliographic programs such as Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP), Cooperative Online Serials Program (CONSER), and Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO). He boldly disagreed with certain decisions by the Library of Congress and the broader library community because he knew these decisions were not beneficial for users. His actions led to the development of online cataloging at NLM, minimizing the cataloging effort in hundreds of health sciences libraries and saving millions of dollars for those institutions.

When Joe took the reins of the Regional Medical Library (RML) program, many favored building collections rather than expanding library services. Joe wanted to emphasize library services and foresaw the need for a centralized automated infrastructure for the network's document delivery activities. He developed SERLINE and SERHOLD and established the foundation for the DOCLINE system. As Sally Sinn, a former deputy chief of technical services at NLM, commented, "Joe's foresight was in making critical decisions, not based on an understanding of what the bibliographic decisions were, but rather on what made sense for the user."

Under Cummings' leadership,

Joe moved the library from the batch-process MEDLARS system into the MEDLINE era. He established the MEDLARS Management Section as a focal point for user support, training, and documentation. He understood the value of making database searching a decentralized function of the RML network, and eventually search skills became a requirement for nearly all academic medical and hospital librarians. The ultimate beneficiaries, of course, were health professionals and their patients.

In 1968, a group of librarians in New York and New England, led by Irwin Pizer, went online with the SUNY Biomedical Communication Network, perhaps the first regional online retrieval system for bibliographic information. While actively working to transition NLM's batch search system to a nationwide online environment, Joe was interested in assisting the SUNY librarians. As Pizer commented in his 1984 Janet Doe lecture,

Part of the success of the online union catalog and the SUNY Biomedical Communication Network was due to Dr. Joseph Leiter. His faith in the development of systems outside of NLM, and the uses that such systems could be to NLM in the provision of data for planning and modification of the developing MEDLARS II and III systems, opened the way for a period of fruitful and jointly useful collaboration. [1]

Reflecting on those early years, Lucretia W. McClure, FMLA, one of those SUNY network librarians, said that Joe knew how to solve problems, and he gave them confidence and instilled a sense that there was nothing they were unable to do.

Joe never wavered in his commitment to the principles of equal opportunity in hiring, developing, and promoting women and minorities. He took a personal interest in NLM's Associate Program, even participating in the interviews (to the dismay of an occasional candidate). Once new staff came on board, he challenged them to think of unconventional solutions and fostered creativity and innovation. His management style required his staff to employ careful analysis and critical thinking in solving problems. At a time when men occupied most leadership positions, Joe knew that women were every bit as capable. Lois Ann Colaianni, FMLA, Joe's successor as associate director of library operations at NLM, commented that Joe was helpful and generous in rapidly turning over responsibilities to her after she was hired as his deputy.

Joe was a regular attendee at the annual meetings of the Medical Library Association (MLA) and encouraged his staff to participate. He was well known for his presentations at the NLM Online Users' Meeting, often sparring verbally with his questioners. In 1983, Joe was named an MLA Fellow and retired from NLM after fifty years of federal service. Upon reaching that milestone, Colaianni announced that "through Joe's personal generosity, and contributions of his friends and colleagues, the Joseph Leiter NLM/MLA Lectureship will carry on the tradition of stimulating, thought-provoking dialogues for which he was so well known."

In 1989, the MLA Board of Directors bestowed its highest honor, the Marcia C. Noyes Award, on Joe for his "innovative work in the design, development, and manage-

ment of information systems and in the creation and provision of information services and education programs." When announcing the award, Phyllis S. Mirsky, FMLA, who worked for Joe for several years, said,

Programs that are an integral component of library services today owe much to the vision and determination of one man. Today, we take the acronyms of CATLINE, SERLINE, DOCLINE, and MEDLINE for granted. But the programs they represent would not be as widespread as they are had not our awardee, Joseph P. Leiter, understood the need for their development and distribution throughout the health science library community.

Joe was an uncommon man with uncommon talents who benefited our entire profession.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

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